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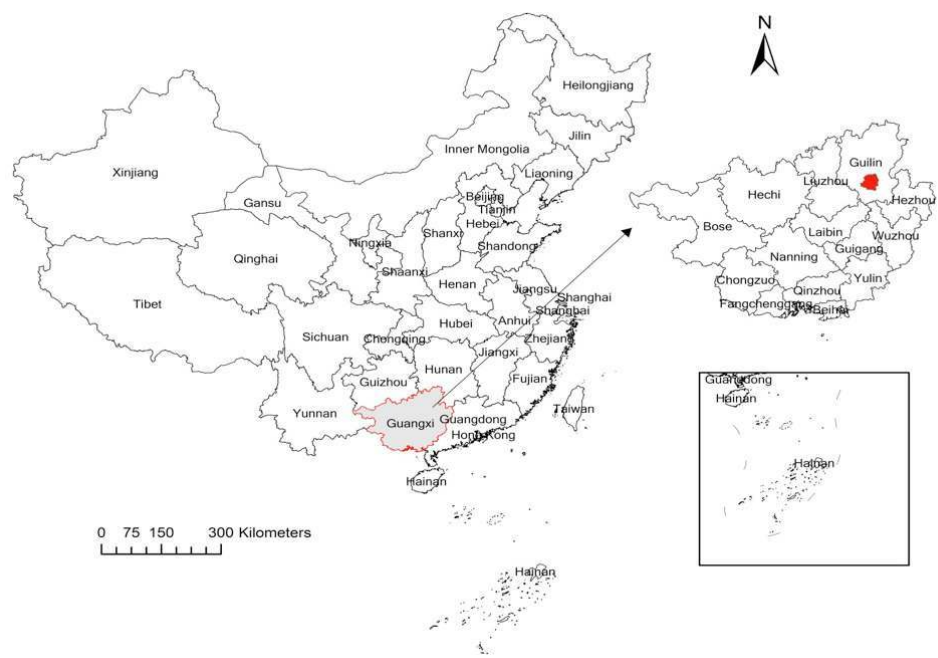
The Chinese Mountains as a Night-time Stage: a Study of the Sound and Light Show *Impressions of Liu Sanjie* (Guilin, Guangxi Region)

Wei Xiang and Philippe Bachimon

A description of the outdoor performance *Impressions of Liu Sanjie*

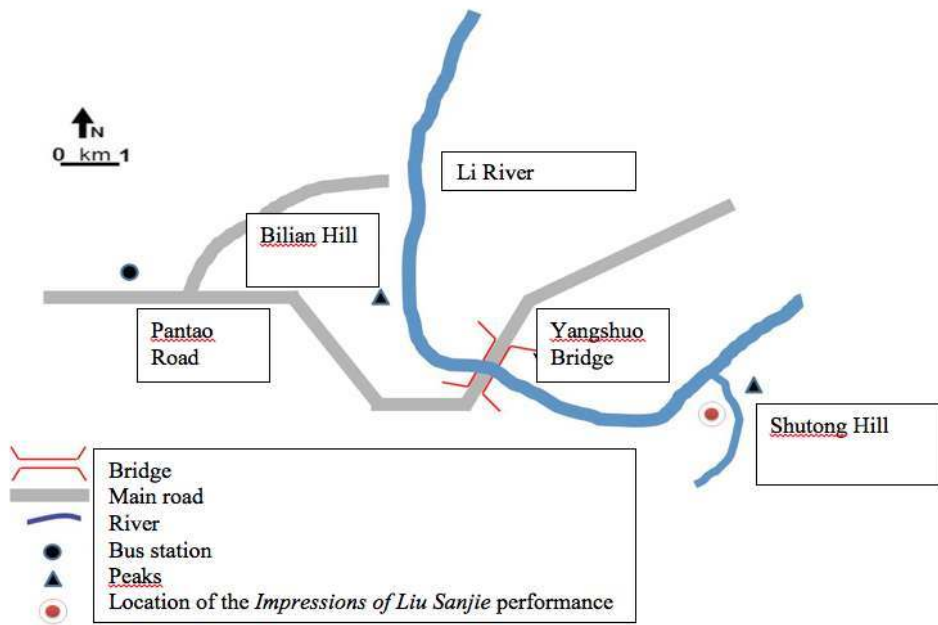
- 1 *Impressions of Liu Sanjie*, the first outdoor spectacular in China, was developed in 2004 in Guilin (map 1) ¹. Guilin is the main city in the autonomous region of Guangxi, in southern China, and has been a tourist resort for over forty years. Landscape painters and poets have immortalised its sugarloaf-shaped karst mountains and imprinted its scenery on the country's collective consciousness (Taunay, 2008). Developed by Zhang Yimou and Mei Shuaiyuan, the performance was conceived as an artistic synthesis of the unique mountain landscape of Guilin and the folktale of Liu Sanjie.
- 2 Situated at the foot of Shutong Hill, in the district of Yangshuo (part of the Guangxi region, which also contains the city of Guilin), the 165 square metre performance area (map 2) stands over water at the end of a headland at the confluence of the Li² and Tianjiahe rivers (photo 1). Twelve peaks rise in the background around this headland. The waterside stage, natural setting and peninsular auditorium constitute a unique location, providing the ideal frame within which the performance can unfold. With its use of sound and light, dancing and music, the outdoor production brings together narrative methods with the performing arts of dance and song. It stirs emotions in the audience through the spectacular effects obtained *in situ* by the laser projectors and sound system (Xiang, Bachimon and Dériz, 2017; Gwiazdzinski, 2000).

Map 1: location of Guilin (Yangshuo)



CREATED BY: WEI XIANG AND PHILIPPE BACHIMON (AUGUST 2017).

Map 2: location of the *Impressions of Liu Sanjie* performance.



CREATED BY: WEI XIANG AND PHILIPPE BACHIMON (AUGUST 2017).

Photo 1: performance stage and auditorium



SOURCE: PRODUCTION COMPANY (AUGUST 2017).

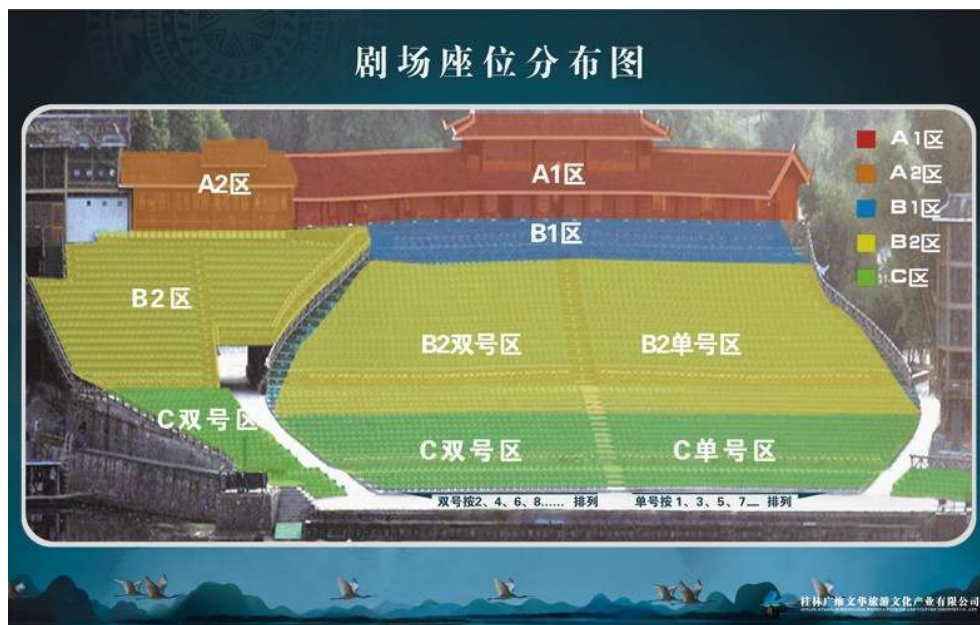
- 3 The company Guangwei Wenhua, which manages the outdoor performance *Impressions of Liu Sanjie*, now employs around 800 staff members, including 600 farmer-performers (*nongmin yanyuan*), and runs a performing arts school that trains actors to take part. The tickets (photo 2) are sold based on location in the auditorium (photo 3) and sell for an average of 200 yuan (equivalent to 28 euros).³ There are 3,200 seats in total, with around 300 VIP seats.⁴

Photo 2: ticket price by auditorium zone

总统席 VIPs areas		贵宾席 Distinguished-guests areas		普通席 An ordinary ticket
A1区 An A1 ticket	A2区 An A2 ticket	B1区 An B1 ticket	B2区 An B2 ticket	C区 C areas
¥:680.00	¥:480.00	¥:320.00	¥:230.00	¥:190.00

Source: official website of *Impressions de Liu Sanjie*, <http://www.yxlsj.com/>.

Photo 3: distribution of seats by zone.



Source: official website of *Impressions de Liu Sanjie*, <http://www.yxlsj.com/>.

- 4 Since opening to audiences in March 2004, *Impressions of Liu Sanjie* has gone from strength to strength. As shown in table 1, there were twice as many performances in 2016 as in 2004, with 4.5 times as many spectators. This growth has been accompanied by a rapid increase (of the same order of magnitude) in the number of tourists visiting Yangshuo. Our interview with the head of the Yangshuo tourist office revealed that before *Impressions of Liu Sanjie* opened, few tourists stayed in the town overnight. The show has changed this, and the town has seen a rise from 6,100 overnight stays in 2004 to 42,000 in 2013.⁵ The hotels, restaurants and shops in the area depend on the performance, which has enabled the development of a night-time economy that begins when the show finishes, which is at 10.30 p.m. or 11 p.m., depending on the season.⁶ During the last ten years, revenue from tourism in the region has increased from 244 million yuan in 2004 to 6.05 billion yuan in 2014.⁷ Celebrations and festivals in the area have become “profitable activities, dependent on a commercial offering and integrated into an economy of goods and symbolic services” (Saez, 2002).

Table 1: number of performances and spectators between 2004 and 2016

Year	2004	2005	2006	2007	2008	2009	2010	2011	2012	2013	2014	2015	2016
Number of performances	263	318	395	470	490	497	451	549	532	518	533	512	530
Number of spectators (thousands)	310	480	780	1,000	1,010	1,280	1,130	1,540	1,510	1,350	1,390	1,390	1,400
Number of tourists visiting Yangshuo (millions)	3.2	3.53	4.15	5.16	5.59	7.20	8.11	9.35	10.5	11.71	12.30	13.04	14.39
Percentage (%) [*]	9.7	13.6	18.8	19.4	18.1	17.8	13.9	16.5	14.4	11.5	11.3	10.7	9.7

^{*} Number of spectators compared to the number of tourists visiting Yangshuo. For example in 2004, 310,000 performance tickets were sold, representing 9.7% of the number of tourists visiting Yangshuo (3,200,000 tourists).

Source: the Guangwei Wenhua company and the official website of the Yangshuo district local authority, <http://www.yangshuo.gov.cn/>

- 5 The success of *Impressions of Liu Sanjie* has led to Mei Shuaiyuan’s team creating twenty other performances of a similar nature (table 2), mainly in other Chinese Scenic Areas, which have in turn become drivers of economic growth in their region’s tourism sector.⁸

The model has thus spread across China and as a consequence it has begun to raise issues of competition between destinations, and in particular with the original location studied in this article.

Table 2: list of outdoor performances created by Mei Shuaiyuan's tourism company Shanshui Shengdian (2004-2017)

Performance title	Location	Year
Impressions de Liu Sanjie	Yangshuo (Guilin)	2004
Zongchan Shaolin Yinyue Dadian	Dengfeng (Henan)	2007
Dasong Dongjing Menghua	Kaifeng (Henan)	2009
Tianmen Fox Fairy	Zhangjiajie (Hunan)	2009
Zhonghua Taishan Fengchan Dadian	Tai'an (Shandong)	2010
Wencheng Gongzhu	Lhasa (Xizang)	2012
Daojie Dujiangyan	Dujiangyan (Sichuan)	2012
Puti Dongxing	Yunzhou (Shandong)	2012
Jinggang shan	Jinggangshan (Jiangxi)	2013
Dingsheng Wangchao Kangxi dadian	Chengde (Hebei)	2013
Tianxia Panshan	Jixian (Tianjin)	2014
Caolu Zhugeliang	Longzhong (Hubei)	2014
Longchuandiao	Enshi (Hubei)	2014
Mengli Laojia	Wuyuan (Jiangxi)	2015
Jinshan Foyu	Zhaoyuan (Shandong)	2015
Change	Xianning (Hubei)	2015
Baoen Shengdian	Nanjing (Jiangsu)	2016
Huoshao Yuanmingyuan	Hengdian (Zhejiang)	2016
Famen Wangshi	Famensi (Shaanxi)	2017
Tianye Kuanghuan	Sanya Haitangwan (Hainan)	2017

Source: official website of the tourism company Shanshui Shengdian, <http://www.shan-shui.com/about.html>

How the legend of Liu Sanjie has developed through its representation in different media

- 6 In a sense, Liu Sanjie is the cultural symbol of Guilin. From the oral tradition to written literature and from there to theatre, cinema, television and finally the outdoor performance, we feel it is important to retrace how the substance of the legend has changed through its representation in different media.

Liu Sanjie in the oral tradition

- 7 There are several versions of the legend of Liu Sanjie. Although its origin is uncertain, this has not prevented the tale and its related songs from becoming closely identified with the people of the Guangdong and Guangxi regions. The story goes as follows: during the Tang dynasty, a young peasant girl from a Zhuang⁹ village was well-known as a singer in the mountains, when she rebelled against a marriage into which she was being forced at the age of just fifteen. She ran away in the year 722 in the company of her true love, a young man named Zhang (Qin, 1992).¹⁰
- 8 Since she sang the ballads of Yufeng Mountain so wonderfully, the Zhuang are said to have kept Liu Sanjie's memory alive after her death with a festival every March 3 (according to the lunar calendar) when they would sing and dance in her honour. She thus appears to have had a significant and constant influence from the Tang dynasty until the present day. During the Song dynasty (960-976), the Zhuang people erected an altar and a statue of her, to the great astonishment of the emperor at the time.¹¹ During the Qing dynasty (1644-1911) they gave her a date of birth, in the year 705, and during the Republic of China (1912-1949), her birthplace was given as the city of Yizhou. It is impossible not to see this narrative continuum as running in parallel with the affirmation and preservation of Zhuang identity over the centuries.

From opera to the silver screen

- 9 In 1959, after the foundation of the current People's Republic of China, the region of Guangxi organised a competition to pay homage to Liu Sanjie in various artistic forms. The opera *Liu Sanjie* eventually won this competition and the opportunity to be performed in Beijing. From then on, Liu Sanjie became popular throughout China, and the opera has remained a classic work of modern Chinese opera. In the 1960s, the legend of Liu Sanjie inspired a film directed by Su Li in which Huang Wanqiu and Liu Shilong played the main roles (photo 4). The story somewhat differs from the original. In the film, Liu Sanjie flees from Liuzhou to Guilin in order to escape the exorbitant taxes imposed on peasants by the land owners. There she falls in love with Aliu, her soul mate. The peasants pass the time as they pick tea by singing protest songs against the land owners, but one of the owners, Mo Cairen, forbids them from going into the fields and instead organises a singing competition between the peasants and his own singers, in which Liu Sanjie takes part. She wins the competition and the right for the villagers to continue singing as they pick the crops. But one night, Mo abducts her. She is saved by Aliu with the help of the peasants and the two lovers take refuge in a banyan tree before fleeing from the land owners. The moral of the story as shown on film thus becomes the "class struggle" in

which the villagers are engaged against the land owners, with no reference to any ethnic context. This film had a major impact on people born in the 1950s and 1960s, and twenty years later, when Chinese tourists went to Guilin, it was to see the filming location, and in particular the banyan tree, which had become a cult symbol. This nostalgic rereading of Liu Sanjie contributes to concealing how the legend was manipulated by the authorities during the political context of the Great Leap Forward between 1958 and 1960. This period, characterised by mandatory collectivisation of the land, and thus the elimination of its owners, “the villains of history”, led to an appalling famine that resulted in the deaths of tens of millions of Chinese people. By focusing only on the romantic dimension of the legend, the cinematographic pilgrimage can be seen as a form of catharsis.

Photo 4: poster for the film *Liu Sanjie* (1961)



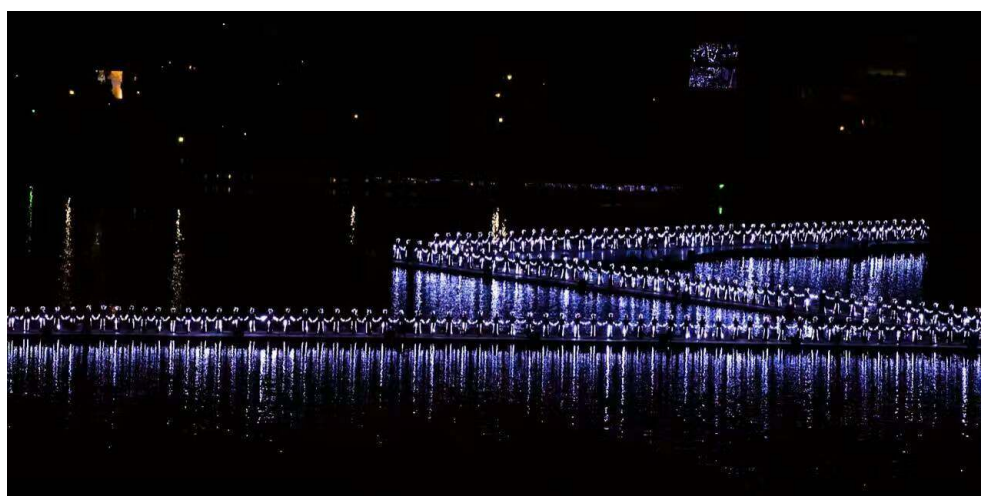
Source: www.baidu.com.

The outdoor performance

- 10 Mei Shuaiyuan, who is originally from Guangxi province, leads the Guangxi company of actors and is known as a supporter of local culture. In 1998, he was involved in the regional Department of Culture's tourism project to promote Guangxi as a destination. Taking inspiration from the folktale and the landscape of Guilin (the mountains and the water), he had the idea of creating a performance that linked these two elements, not in a traditional opera house, but outdoors in the “original” landscape. Although this had never been done before, his project received a grant from the Guangxi Department of Culture. In 1998 he went to Beijing to request help from leading Chinese director Zhang Yimou, and two years later Mei and Zhang's team, funded by a large company from the region, founded the Guangwei Wenhua tourism company to manage promotion of the

outdoor performance *Impressions of Liu Sanjie*. After the directors settled on the headland situated at the confluence of the Li and Tianjiahe rivers, with the support of the Yangshuo local government, the authorities expropriated seven hectares of land from the villages of Tianjahe and Shutongshan to set up the Geyu.¹² *Impressions of Liu Sanjie* opened to audiences in March 2004. The show consists of a series of seven scenes: “The Prelude - Legend of the Mountain and the Water”, “Red Impression - Mountain Song”, “Green Impression - the Homeland”, “Blue Impression - Love Songs”, “Gold Impression - Fishing Boat Ablaze”, “Silver Impression - Grand Ceremony” and “Finale - Song of Sky and Earth” (photos 5, 6, 7 and 8). Inspired by the details of the folktale and its main episodes, and with the use of sound and lighting techniques, the *Impressions of Liu Sanjie* outdoor performance presents itself as a “living” testament to the local culture of Guangxi by combining traditional Zhuang song and dance with a mountain backdrop and on-water staging. This night-time performance was immediately very popular throughout China, and for nearly fifteen years has been the mainstay of tourism in Guilin (Xiang, 2017).

Photo 5: scene from the performance *Impressions of Liu Sanjie*.



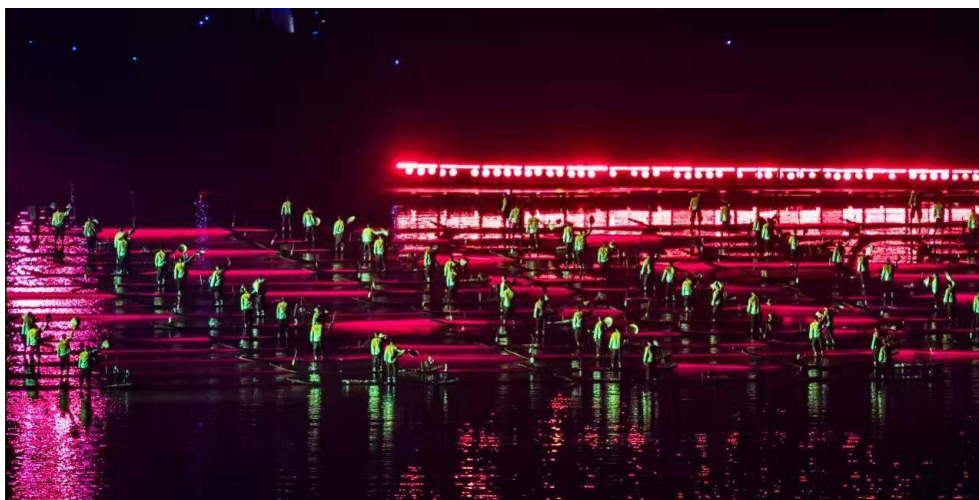
SOURCE: PRODUCTION COMPANY.

Photo 6: scene from the performance *Impressions of Liu Sanjie*



SOURCE: PRODUCTION COMPANY.

Photo 7: scene from the performance *Impressions of Liu Sanjie*



SOURCE: PRODUCTION COMPANY.

Photo 8: scene from the performance *Impressions of Liu Sanjie*.



SOURCE: PRODUCTION COMPANY.

- 11 We can thus identify three main successive periods of cultural symbolism in the story of Liu Sanjie. The first, the oral commemorative tradition, limits her to the regional context of the personification of a minority ethnic group. The second, from 1959, sees her nationalist appropriation by an opera and a propaganda film, which make Liu Sanjie the figurehead of a class struggle against the big rural land owners that went on to end in agonising failure. The final stage begins in 2004 with the outdoor performance *Impressions of Liu Sanjie*, which seeks a compromise, albeit one of a rather kitsch nature, between the fantasy of the night-time river performance and the two earlier traditions. While it has certainly had no lack of financial success, what about the local impact of the show and the images presented to tourists?

The image of Liu Sanjie and the regional identity of Guilin in the eyes of tourists and local residents

- 12 Since the 1990s, a consumer society has been developing in China. In this context, and influenced by the 1961 *Liu Sanjie* film, tourists have come to Guilin to visit Liu Sanjie's homeland, admire the mountain and water landscapes of Guilin, and enjoy the traditional songs of Guangxi. At the tourist sites associated with Liu Sanjie, scenes from the 1961 film are reproduced in the form of street performances - particularly the scene in which Liu Sanjie and Aliu sing face-to-face, and the scene in which the peasants sing as they pick tea leaves - with young Zhuang girls dressing up as Liu Sanjie, singing her songs and being photographed with tourists in return for tips. Liu Sanjie has thus become the most commercially successful cultural emblem of Guilin and Guangxi among visitors, but with a dynamic that borders on begging. The local culture thus appears to be subject to a process of commodification, here initially taking the form of expropriation, then folklorisation, and even pauperisation through working for tips. In becoming a tangible object of the tourist imagination through experience, the reified symbol of the local culture has managed to tip the story into the world of simulation: a world in which the accumulation of different forms of signs blurs the difference between the real world and the imagination (Featherstone M., 1995; Davallon, 2006).
- 13 To better understand the image of Liu Sanjie and the regional identity of Guilin in the eyes of tourists and local residents, from 30 July to 5 August 2017 we administered 110 questionnaires among tourists in the city of Yangshuo¹³ (map 2), of which 100 were

validated. We also carried out ten interviews with villagers and five interviews with business owners. Tourists were chosen randomly due to lack of information on the composition of tourists visiting the site. The results showed that three-quarters had come as a family while a quarter were visiting as part of a group. From a socioprofessional perspective, 15% were students, 25% civil servants, 25% private sector workers, 25% from the liberal professions and 10% were retired.

- 14 Our survey revealed that the characteristic landscapes of Guilin (for 26% of those surveyed) and Liu Sanjie (21%) were the two main motivations for visiting. These were followed by more specific aspects such as the Li River (13%), Guilin rice noodles (13%), the Zhuang ethnicity (8%), the Zhuang terraced fields (7%), Xiangbi (Elephant Trunk) Hill (7%) and traditional Zhuang songs (5%). Our survey also identified reasons for visiting Yangshuo: the top three responses were the characteristic landscape (for 43% of those surveyed), Zhuang culture (35%) and the outdoor performance *Impressions of Liu Sanjie* (11%).
- 15 Our observations of the activities and motivations of tourists and local residents provide a somewhat contradictory view of the reculturation and acculturation currently taking place in Guilin. Although the people of Yizhou had stopped making offerings to Liu Sanjie after the founding of the Republic of China, tourism appears to have revived this tradition. The people of the region have reinstated altars dedicated to Liu Sanjie and have begun to make offerings to her again - though, it is worth noting, in the context of an increase in Taoist beliefs¹⁴ in spirits of place. This is also true for the Zhuang tradition of the *Geyu*, the courting ballad, which had almost disappeared but has been revived by the outdoor performance. *Impressions of Liu Sanjie*, like other folkloric shows, is an interpretation of cultural symbols in the form of an artistic performance (Wu X., 2010).
- 16 And yet, in the current consumerist culture, the local culture appears to be moving gradually away from tradition, perhaps even from authenticity, and integrating into the dominant “culture”. It has been transformed not only by tourism, but also by the media influence and commercialisation that come with it, which often simply copy and paste local culture (or reduce it to a collection of stereotypes), in order to produce a mass aesthetic experience (Wu X., 2007). This is the case even though opinions of the aesthetic experience are not universally positive. To the question “What did you not like about the show?”, 35% of those surveyed felt it was difficult to understand, 15% found it too complicated, 29% did not like the commercial aspect, 6% found the sound and light too overwhelming and 15% said they could not see the plot of the 1961 film in it.
- 17 This form of creative technique is of course very reductive and produces an illusion, that of a spirit of place which in turn produces an “instant and ephemeral” aesthetic impression. Ultimately it is this issue of compatibility, or lack of compatibility, between the register of emotional shock and aesthetic saturation that lies behind the responses of the tourists (Xiang, Bachimon and Dérizoz, 2017). Close inspection of the seven scenes in *Impressions de Liu Sanjie* reveals that the show has only superficial links with the 1961 film or the story of Liu Sanjie. It is rather, at best, a loose and cavalier reinterpretation of the film, particularly in the staging of the face-to-face scene between Liu Sanjie and Aliu and the scene with the fisherman on the Li River. Apart from a young girl who sings the Zhuang mountain song at the beginning, Liu Sanjie does not appear at any other point during the show. Instead, the team behind the performance has chosen a selection of stereotypes that emphasise some of the “cultural” symbols of Guangxi. This impressionistic approach no doubt explains why the show was not called *The Story of Liu*

Sanjie. During our interview, Mr Xu, a farmer-performer, confessed that the performers themselves did not fully understand the meaning of the show: “We perform what the director has told us to. And we understand that we’re showing our culture to tourists and that this will attract more and more national and international visitors to our region.” Thanks to the success of the night-time performance, local residents and business owners have begun to see the economic value of Liu Sanjie, and have used the words “Liu Sanjie” and “Impression” for commercial purposes when naming restaurants, hotels and craft shops. For local residents and business owners, Liu Sanjie may be a cultural symbol, but she has most importantly become a selling point: “We know that Liu Sanjie was not born here. So what? The tourists think that she was. That’s the main thing. We all make our living from her,” our interviewee Mr Zhou declared in a somewhat cynical manner.¹⁵

- 18 As the three villages of Tianjiahe, Mushan and Baishawan are very close to the location of the show, their residents, drawn by the commercial potential, offer tourists a way to watch the shows “illegally”: either from bamboo rafts, which they hide under trees on the river, from a temporary deck that they have built overlooking the area, or from a cave in the mountain. Tourists only pay them 30 to 50 yuan (4 to 6 euros) each, which represents a 60 to 90% reduction from the official price. The substantial saving motivates people to choose this fraudulent option, although it is not without risk for either the locals or the tourists. This parallel economy was condemned in a 2014 report on the channel CCTV¹⁶ and appears to have subsequently declined.
- 19 This overview of the on- and off-stage aspects of the performance demonstrates that it has had great success, but the issue of its sustainability is already being raised. It is entirely possible that audiences will tire of the show. Even the farmer-performers, to whom we return below, had concerns about this: “We were really excited when they created the performance, but when you perform the same show for over 10 years, you don’t have the same level of enthusiasm. (...) Other cultural performances¹⁷ will come to Yangshuo. We’ll soon have competition,” predicted Mr Xu.¹⁸

The farmer-performer: a specific “product” of the outdoor performance

- 20 With the development of night-time tourism (Yue Chao, 2013),¹⁹ and the advent of the outdoor performance *Impressions of Liu Sanjie*, the lives of local villagers have been turned upside down. Before, they were farmers, living off their land, which gave them a certain degree of security. With no land now to cultivate, they are disoriented and must adapt to a new way of life whether they like it or not.
- 21 The outdoor theatre and its related infrastructure (car park, stalls, etc.) replaced their sugar cane, maize and peanut plantations following the expropriations carried out by the local government in 1997. According to our interview with Mr Xu, a villager and farmer-performer from Tianjiahe, the majority of villagers were involved in building the theatre, and received what they judged to be fair remuneration for such work. Then, after the show was developed, the directors suddenly realised how difficult it would be to stage a performance on water without the villagers - the ideal collaborators due to their knowledge of the river and their skills steering their bamboo rafts - and thus decided to employ them as farmer-performers. Unsure of their own acting talents, the farmers were initially reluctant, but some, including Mr Xu, gave it a go and gradually realised that

mastery of the dramatic arts was not essential to the roles assigned to them: sculling a bamboo raft, lighting the fishing boat fires and pulling a red silk cord. And most importantly - a huge novelty - every month they received a salary. As word of mouth spread, they all wanted to be involved, and the production team was forced to choose from among the applicants.

- 22 As a result, since the show opened the villagers have seen a considerable improvement in their material living standards, as they now have three new sources of income. The first comes from local residents offering accommodation in their homes, either directly as guesthouses or run through external operators who manage the letting. They also row tourists out on their bamboo rafts to admire the beauty of Guilin's mountain and river scenery (and sometimes to watch the show "illegally"). This unmissable trip on the Li River constitutes a second source of income for the villagers. Finally, their salaries as performers provide them with a stable income. The sum total of these three sources of income enables them to earn an excellent living. According to Mr Xu, they can earn up to 10,000 yuan over the year (1400 euros), primarily during the high tourist season.²⁰ Their income is now ten times higher than it was when they made their living from agriculture. "Impressions de Liu Sanjie has transformed our lives. We live much better than we did before," recognises Mr Xu. But there is still land to cultivate, and nobody wants to return to the fields. As the show does not begin until 7 p.m., it would be easy for these "farmer"-performers to work there during the day, but they in fact prefer to do casual tourism-related work in the town of Yangshuo, acting as local guides, driving coaches or managing bicycle hire operations, etc. The most common job is taking tourists out on the Li River during the day.
- 23 The majority of the farmer-performers come from five of the seven villages located around the performance area: Tianjiahe, Mushan, Mushanzha, Maozaishan and Xingping. During our interview,²¹ Mr Xu told us that in Tianjiahe, 60 of the 300 inhabitants were farmer-performers, and 160 villagers in Mushan were also involved. A total of 300 villagers work as farmer-performers, playing different roles during the show: unravelling red silk ribbons, lighting lanterns on their fishing boats and manoeuvring their rafts. Others are also employed in roles such as gardeners, guides and caretakers. The average salary of a farmer-performer is between 700 and 800 yuan (equivalent to 100 euros) per month.
- 24 Of the ten villagers interviewed,²² seven identified themselves as farmer-performers, one still as a farmer, another as a performer and a final individual neither as a performer nor a farmer. "I have worked as a farmer-performer since the official opening of Impressions de Liu Sanjie. Now my son also works with me. His partner is a local guide at the site and my wife is a street vendor outside the entrance to the show. The whole family lives off this famous show. We earn around 50,000 yuan [equivalent to 6500 euros] a year. Last year, our family built a three-storey house. We are very happy," Mr Zhang told us.²³ Mr Yang told us that he was a "farmer-performer" with a fixed salary of 1200 yuan (160 euros) a month: "I also receive overtime. The company takes care of my insurance. My salary is the largest and most stable income in the family. I take out a raft on the Li River during the day. I earn 15 yuan from each trip, and can do 4 or 5 trips a day. And I'm happy with the income that tourism brings me."²⁴ Finally, Mr Zhou told us that he had been a motorcycle driver since *Impressions de Liu Sanjie* opened and that his "job [was] to take tourists either from the hotel to the show, or from the show to the shopping street. I earn 5 yuan a trip, and I do at least 10 trips a day in the low season. In the high season, I earn 700 or 800 yuan (100 euros) a day as I also work as a local guide."²⁵

- 25 There is no doubt that the night-time performance provides the villagers with a living and that, based on their testimony and financial income, they get by much better than before. This direct income is supplemented by valued new services such as Zhang Yimou's Li River Art School, which was established in 2000 and trains the village children. The school is almost free, with schoolchildren (or students, depending on their age) paying only 600 yuan (80 euros) in enrolment fees, and after a training period of 3 years, they are able to work in any outdoor performance in China. The employment rate upon leaving the school is nearly 100%.²⁶ But this also raises some concerns: *"The school has solved the problem of employment in the village, and that's a good thing. For the girls to be able to study there. But doesn't it prevent them from choosing other careers? I mean, if the outdoor show is no longer successful, what else will they be able to do?"*²⁷ Finally, for the men who work as farmer-performers, there is the worry of depending on one cultural activity alone. If show audiences wane, or even collapse (due to competition from other performances and decreasing novelty thanks to the passage of time), what will they do? Go back to the land? Leave for the city?²⁸

Conclusion

- 26 In China, the night remains a largely closed frontier except in a few shady neighbourhoods in the big cities. This can be confirmed simply by looking at a satellite image of light pollution, in which China can be seen to be a low emitter of light considering its population. In the countryside, people continue to remain at home, and even if they have indoor screens to prolong their evenings into the night, there is little nightlife outdoors. The tourism that we have described above, and in particular the night-time performance, appears to turn this order of things on its head, albeit at a very local level, by creating a nightlife. The farmer-performers, who come from the Zhuang ethnic group, now work at night as performers in an over-the-top theatrical show, and when it finishes the town's streets are animated by the presence of wandering pedestrians and busloads of tourists returning to their hotels. Tourism has thus disturbed the traditional rhythm of life of the inhabitants of these mountainous areas famous for their landscapes. Although the income of the farmer-performers has considerably increased, it comes from this night-time work supplemented by casual work carried out in the daytime tourist economy. This is to the detriment of their leisure time, and even to the detriment of traditional subsistence farming, which is now neglected.
- 27 We also see a shift to the hinterland in the story of the legend of Liu Sanjie: although the traditional songs and dances associated with her are said to have played a role in lunar festivals since time immemorial, with the advent of modernity this legend was exported into the theatre and cinema, both closed-off places in the big Chinese cities. The return of the legend to its origins (if the myths are to be believed) offers a kind of repatriation that is intended to give it authenticity (making it a pilgrimage site) - but this comes at the cost of dizzying sound and lighting in which excess appears to be the norm. The halo of light around the show, extended by lasers and fireworks, contrasts with the darkness in which the surrounding mountains are shrouded. The crude colours cut through the shadows that begin at their feet. Watching the show is like being on a floodlight downhill ski slope at night. Points of reference are lost and the audience no longer understands much of what is going on in the glow of this patch of brightness. Although the effect is certainly

one of disorientation, it is not however one of exoticism. For ultimately the artefact, through its pretence, seems to prevail over a cultural dimension that might be equated with ethnic tourism.

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NOTES

1. This night-time musical performance currently takes place on the Li River at Yangshuo . The actors are local residents from the Zhuang minority and boatmen with bamboo rafts. It was created by the famous Chinese director Zhang Yimou. This colourful musical performance uses singing, visual effects, multi-coloured lighting, multiple costumes and original music and includes the local population in order to bring to life the famous legend of the “song fairy”, the third daughter of Liu (Liu Sanjie).
2. The source of the Li River is on Mao'er Mountain, at an altitude of 2142 metres, and the river is 437 km long. Its two banks, which cover over 83 km between Guilin and Yangshuo, play a role in the karst topography. This area is considered to have the most beautiful landscape in Guilin, and the proverb “the landscape of Guilin is the most beautiful in the world” (*Guilin shanshui jia tianxia*) is well-known in China.
3. By way of comparison, these prices are equivalent to those at the Festival Off in Avignon, but the average individual salary of a Chinese citizen is 600 euros a month, a third of the average salary in France.
4. Source: official website of the outdoor performance *Impressions de Liu Sanjie*, <http://www.yxlsj.com/>.
5. Interview with Ms Li, head of the Tourist Office in Yangshuo, August 1 2017.
6. In spring, the first show begins at 8.15 p.m. and ends at 9.15 p.m.; the second show begins at 10.05 p.m. and ends at 11.05 p.m. In summer, the first show begins at 8.00 p.m. and ends at 9.00 p.m.; the second show begins at 9.50 p.m. and ends at 10.50 p.m. In autumn, the first show begins at 7.40 p.m. and ends at 8.40 p.m.; the second show begins at 9.30 p.m. and ends at 10.30 p.m. There are even three shows a night during the three Golden Week holidays in China: the first at 7 p.m., the second at 8.30 p.m. and the third at 10.00 p.m.
7. Source: official website of the Yangshuo district local authority, <http://www.yangshuo.gov.cn/>.
8. Based on the average price of a performance ticket, 200 yuan (27 euros), and 500 spectators per evening (in high season, there are 2 or 3 additional performances a night, up to 11.00 p.m.), we estimate the average monthly revenue of the show to be 3 million yuan (400,000 euros). At a regional level this means that Guangwei Wenhua has become the largest business in the region, or at least the one generating the most revenue.
9. The Zhuang people is one of the largest ethnic groups in China after the majority Han group. The Zhuang (around 15 to 18 million people) primarily live in the regions of Guangxi, Guangdong and Yunnan. The Zhuang population in Guanzi represents 87% of all Zhuang people in China.
10. Qin Guiqing, 1992, *Liu sanjie zongheng*, Guangxi Minzu Chubenshe, Nanning.
11. Lin Nan, 2003, “Yinxiang Liusanjie” de ziben gushi, *Yangguang zhilv*, (5):87-88.
12. In the Zhuang language, *Geyu* refers to a mountain song festival dating back to the Tang dynasty, which takes place in a terraced field either during the agricultural off-season or during the moon festival. On such occasions, the villagers wear traditional dress and the girls and boys sing face-to-face; the girls then throw balls made from silk ribbons at the boys they want to fall in love with them.
13. Yangshuo is a district close to Guilin (approximately 70 km away). It is known not only for being the shooting location for the 1961 film *Liu Sanjie*, but also as the location for the outdoor performance. Yangshuo and Guilin are the two must-see tourist destinations in the region of Guangxi.

14. Taoism, along with Confucianism and Buddhism, is one of the three pillars of Chinese philosophy, and is based on the existence of a principle at the origin of all things, called “Tao”. It has its roots in ancient culture with founding texts including Laozi’s *Tao Te Ching*, the *Liezi* and the *Zhuangzi*, and is expressed through practices that have had a major effect throughout the Far East, and also in the West since the twentieth century.
15. Interview conducted on 3 August 2017 with Mr Zhou, a business owner in the town of Yangshuo.
16. China Central Television.
17. In September 2015, the tourist company “Songcheng” began working on a major project to produce a cultural performance in Yangshuo, which will take place in Yangshuo in late 2017 and will represent major competition for the outdoor performance *Impressions de Liu Sanjie*.
18. Interview conducted on 3 August 2017 with Mr Xu, a farmer-performer.
19. Yue Chao, 2013, *Zhongguo Yejian Lvyou Zongshu*, Lvyou Luntan, Vol. 6, No. 4. Yue refers to night-time tourism as covering the various forms of tourist and leisure activities from when a tourist has dinner to the time (s)he goes to bed.
20. From May to October.
21. Interview conducted on 31 July 2017 in the village of Tianjiahe at 2.30 p.m. Mr Xu is a villager from Tianjiahe; he was a farmer-performer at the time and managed a team of 10 farmer-performers.
22. We conducted ten interviews with villagers in Tianjiahe on 3 August 2017 with the help of Mr Xu.
23. Interview conducted on 3 August 2017 with Mr Zhang.
24. Interview conducted on 3 August 2017 with Mr Yang.
25. Interview conducted on 3 August 2017 with Mr Zhou.
26. Source: official website of Zhang Yimou’s Li River Art School, <http://www.zymlyjysxx.com/>.
27. Interview conducted with Ms. Huang, deputy head of the Yangshuo Radio and Television Board, 4 August 2017.
28. An answer to these questions may perhaps be found through comparison with the Puy du Fou attraction, for example. When it was created in 1989 it was purely an outdoor sound and light show similar to the one studied in this article (and perhaps inspiring it). It has now become a theme park that attracts over two million visitors every year (with 2.2 million in 2017). It does continue to rely on a charitable network of 3,900 local volunteers (who are compensated) to produce the twenty-eight summer shows, but it increasingly requires more and more professionals from other locations to manage the permanent services that have been created through diversification.

ABSTRACTS

As the tourism sector grows as a whole, night-time tourism is playing a significant complementary role in the regional development not only of urban areas, but also of the mountainous areas that surround them. Following twelve years of very rapid development, night-time tourist products in China’s mountainous Scenic Areas are offered primarily in the form of outdoor performances. Based on a case study of the show *Impressions of Liu Sanjie*, which in 2004 became China’s first outdoor production and has paved the way for other night-time

tourist products in China's mountainous Scenic Areas, we consider the nature and effects of this form of entertainment. Twelve years on, what have been the economic, social, cultural and environmental consequences for the region? How do night-time performances contribute (or not) to local development? And what is the relationship between the image of Liu Sanjie and the local identity of Guilin? This article attempts to provide answers to such questions.

INDEX

Keywords: outdoor performance, mountains, night-time tourism, landscape, Liu Sanjie

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